

Gender-Sensitive Language

What is "gender-sensitive language" and why should I use it?

English speakers and writers have traditionally been taught to use masculine nouns and pronouns in situations where the gender of their subject(s) is unclear or variable, or when a group to which they are referring contains members of both sexes. For example, the US Declaration of Independence states that ". . . all men are created equal . . ." and most of us were taught in elementary school to understand the word "men" in that context includes both male and female Americans. In recent decades, however, as women have become increasingly involved in the public sphere of American life, writers have reconsidered the way they express gender identities and relationships. Because most English language readers no longer understand the word "man" to be synonymous with "people," writers today must think more carefully about the ways they express gender in order to convey their ideas clearly and accurately to their readers.

If you're reading this handout, you're probably already aware that tackling gender sensitivity in your writing is no small task, especially since there isn't yet (and there may never be) a set of concrete guidelines on which to base your decisions. Fortunately, there are a number of different strategies the gender-savvy writer can use to express gender relationships with precision. This handout will provide you with an overview of some of those strategies so that you can "mix and match" as necessary when you write.

Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that substitutes for a noun. The English language provides pronoun options for references to masculine nouns (for example, "he" can substitute for "Tom"), feminine nouns ("she" can replace "Lucy"), and neutral/non-human nouns ("it" stands in for "a tree"), but no choice for sex-neutral third-person singular nouns ("the writer," "a student," or "someone"). Although most of us learned in elementary school that masculine pronouns (he, his, him) should be used as the "default" in situations where the referent (that is, the person or thing to which you're referring) could be either male or female, that usage is generally considered unacceptable now. So what should you do when you're faced with one of those gender-neutral or gender-ambiguous situations? Well, you've got a few options . . .

1. Use "they"

This option is currently much-debated by grammar experts, but most agree that it works well in at least several kinds of situations. In order to use "they" to express accurately gender relationships, you'll need to understand that "they" is traditionally used only to refer to a plural noun. For example,

Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were famous "first-wave" American feminists.

OR

They were also both involved in the Abolitionist movement.

In speech, though, we early twenty-first century Americans commonly use "they" to refer to a singular referent. According to many grammar experts, that usage is incorrect, but here's an example of how it sounds in our every-day speech:

The author of the Ms. magazine article explained the challenges faced by women professionals in the male-dominated fields of medicine, business, and law.

***They** argued that feminists must fight the limitations of the "glass ceiling" many professional women encounter.*

Note that in this example, "the author" is singular, but it is replaced in the second sentence by "they," a plural pronoun. In speech, we often don't notice such substitutions of the plural for the singular, but in writing, some will find such substitutions awkward or incorrect. Some people argue that "they" should become the default gender-neutral pronoun for English writing, but since that usage can still sound awkward to many readers, its best to use "they" only in plural situations. Thus, one other option the gender-savvy writer may choose to employ is to make her/his sentence plural. Here's one way that can work:

Many people accept the negative stereotype that a feminist's beliefs are based on her hatred of men.

OR

*Many people accept the negative stereotype that **feminists** base **their** beliefs on hatred of men.*

2. Use she or he - or s/he.

Another, more simple, option the gender-savvy writer can use to deal with situations in which the gender of the referent is unknown or variable is to write out both pronoun options as "she or he" or "she/he". For example,

*Each Women's Studies major must take a course in Feminist Theory. **She or he** may also get course credit for completing an internship at a local organization that benefits women.*

OR

*Each Women's Studies major must take a course in Feminist Theory. **She/he** may also get course credit for completing an internship at a local organization that benefits women.*

3. Alternate genders and pronouns

You may also choose to alternate gendered pronouns. This option will only work in some situations though - usually those that refer to hypothetical situations in which the referent is equally likely to be a male or a female. For example, both male and female students use the Writing Center's services, so the author of our staff manual chose to alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns when writing the following tutoring guidelines:

- Respond as a reader, explaining what and how you were/are thinking as you read her texts so that she can discover where a reader might struggle with her writing.
- Ask him to outline the draft to reveal the organization of the paper.

- Ask her to describe her purpose and audience and show how she has taken them into account in her writing.
- Explain a recurring pattern and let him locate repeated instances of it.

Of course, this author could also have included both pronouns in each sentence by writing "her/his," or "her/him," but in this case, alternating use of gendered pronouns conveyed the same sense of gender variability, and is likely a little easier on the reader, who won't have to pause to process several different options every time a gendered pronoun is needed in the sentence. This example also provides a useful demonstration of how gender-savvy writers can take advantage of the many different options available by choosing the one that best suits the unique requirements of each piece of writing they produce.

4. Eliminate the pronoun altogether

Finally, you can also simply eliminate the pronoun. For example,

Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were famous "first-wave" American feminists.

OR

***Both women** were also involved in the Abolitionist movement.*

OR

*Many people accept the negative stereotype that feminists base **their** beliefs on hatred of men.*

OR

Many people accept the negative stereotype that feminist beliefs are based on hatred of men.

Gendered Nouns

Like gendered pronouns, gendered nouns can also provide a stumbling block for the gender-savvy writer. The best way to avoid the lack of specificity these words can carry is simply to be aware of how we tend to use them in speech and writing. Because gendered nouns are so commonly used and accepted by English writers and speakers, we often don't notice them or the implications they bring with them. Once you've recognized that a gender distinction is being made by such a word though, conversion of the gendered noun into a gender-savvy one is usually very simple.

"Man" and words ending in "-man" are the most commonly used gendered nouns, so avoiding the confusion they bring can be as simple as watching out for these words and replacing them with words that convey your meaning more effectively. For example, if the founding fathers had been gender-savvy writers, they might have written ". . . all people are created equal" instead of ". . . all men are created equal . . ." As you work on becoming a gender-savvy writer, you may find it helpful to watch out for the following gendered nouns and replace them with one of the

alternatives listed below. Check a thesaurus for alternatives to gendered nouns not included in this list.

gendered noun

gender-neutral noun

man	person, individual
freshman	first-year student
mankind	people, human beings, humanity
man-made	machine-made, synthetic
the common man	the average (or ordinary) person
to man	to operate, to cover, to staff
chairman	chair, chairperson, coordinator
mailman	mail carrier, letter carrier, postal worker
policeman	police officer
steward, stewardess	flight attendant
congressman	congress person, legislator, representative
Dear Sir:	Dear Sir or Madam:, Dear Editor:, Dear Service Representative:, To Whom it May Concern:

Proper Nouns

Proper nouns can also give gender-savvy writers pause, but as with common nouns, it is usually very easy to use gender-neutral language once you've noticed the gendered patterns in your own writing. And the best way to avoid any confusion in your use of proper nouns is to use the same rules to discuss of women subjects as you already use when you're writing about men. In the examples below, notice how using different conventions for references to male and female subjects suggests a difference in the amount of respect being given to individuals on the basis of their gender.

1. Refer to women subjects by only their last names - just as you would do for men subjects.

For example, we would never refer to William Shakespeare as just "William," we call him "Shakespeare" or "William Shakespeare." Thus, you should never refer to Jane Austin simply as "Jane," you should write "Jane Austen" or "Austen."

2. In circumstances where you're writing about several people who have the same last name, try using the full name of the person every time you refer to him/her.

For example, if you're writing about George and Martha Washington, referring to him as "Washington" and her as "Martha" conveys a greater respect for him than for her. In order to express an equal amount of respect for these two historical figures, simply refer to each subject by her/his full name: "George Washington" and "Martha Washington." This option sounds like it could get too "wordy," but it actually works very well in most situations.

3. Refer to women subjects by their full titles - just as you would refer to men subjects.

For example, you wouldn't have called President Reagan "Ronald," so you wouldn't want to refer to Prime Minister (of Great Britain) Thatcher as "Margaret." Simply call her "Prime Minister Thatcher," just as you would write "President Reagan" to refer to him.

Sex versus Gender

In many Women's Studies classes, one of the fundamental concepts students are expected to master is the difference feminists see between an individual's sex (which feminists understand as one's biological makeup) and that person's gender (which feminists define as a social construction based on sex). Because this principle is so fundamental to understanding much of the material in many Women's Studies courses, expressing the difference between sex and gender is an important element in many writing assignments given by Women's Studies instructors.

Essentially, all you need to express sex vs. gender distinctions accurately in your writing is a clear understanding of the difference between sex and gender, as feminists understand those two terms. As you are writing, ask yourself whether what you're talking about is someone's biological makeup or something about the way that person has been socialized. If you're referring to biology, use "male" or "female," and if what you're talking about has to do with a behavior or social role someone has been taught because of her/his biology, use "woman" or "man."

Checklist for Gender Revisions

To ensure that you've used gender savvy language in your piece of writing, try asking yourself the following questions:

1. Have you used "man" or "men" or words containing one of them to refer to people who may be female? If so, consider substituting another word. For example, instead of "fireman" try "firefighter."
2. If you have mentioned someone's gender, was it necessary to do so? If you identify someone as a female architect, for example, do you (or would you) refer to someone else as a "male architect"? And if you then note that the woman is an attractive blonde mother of two, do you mention that the man is a muscular, square-jawed father of three? Unless

gender and related matters - looks, clothes, parenthood - are relevant to your point, leave them unmentioned.

3. Do you use any occupational stereotypes? Watch for the use of female pronouns for nurses and male ones for scientists, for example.
4. Do you use language that in any way shows a lack of respect for either sex?
5. Have you used "he," "him," "his," or "himself" to refer to people who may be female?

Sources

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